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# Adult Literacy Assessment in Comparative Contexts

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# Adult Literacy Assessment in Comparative Contexts

## **Abstract**

In an ever-shrinking world, there are increasing efforts among many countries to understand their economic, social, and educational policies in the relative light of other nations' successes and failures. Largely begun by anthropologists in the colonial era, cross-cultural studies examined and compared human behavior ranging from childrearing practices and initiation rites to the training of craftsmen and sedentary agriculturists. Cross-cultural and cross-national comparisons of literacy ability are of rather more recent vintage; for example, studies of the cultural specificities of reading in different languages and scripts, the cognitive consequences of literacy in cultural groups, and skill performance across industrialized countries. This chapter considers the policy implications of these different approaches on such issues as the classification of literacy levels, use of mother-tongue and second languages in assessment, comparability of assessment across time and cultures, and the measurement of the social consequences of literacy attainment. Several important limitations and opportunities in the comparative use of literacy assessments are described, particularly with respect to the distinction between emic and etic perspectives on assessment.

## **Disciplines**

Adult and Continuing Education | Bilingual, Multilingual, and Multicultural Education | Education | Educational Assessment, Evaluation, and Research | International and Comparative Education | Language and Literacy Education



## **Adult Literacy Assessment in Comparative Contexts**

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*In an ever-shrinking world, there are increasing efforts among many countries to understand their economic, social, and educational policies in the relative light of other nations' successes and failures. Largely begun by anthropologists in the colonial era, cross-cultural studies examined and compared human behavior ranging from childrearing practices and initiation rites to the training of craftsmen and sedentary agriculturists. Cross-cultural and cross-national comparisons of literacy ability are of rather more recent vintage; for example, studies of the cultural specificities of reading in different languages and scripts, the cognitive consequences of literacy in cultural groups, and skill performance across industrialized countries. This chapter considers the policy implications of these different approaches on such issues as the classification of literacy levels, use of mother-tongue and second languages in assessment, comparability of assessment across time and cultures, and the measurement of the social consequences of literacy attainment. Several important limitations and opportunities in the comparative use of literacy assessments are described, particularly with respect to the distinction between emic and etic perspectives on assessment.*

## INTRODUCTION

As the year 2000 approaches, many countries have renewed their attempts to better understand national social, economic, and educational policies in the relative light of other nations' successes and failures. In principle there is nothing wrong with comparative analysis; indeed, comparisons are one of the few ways by which nations can gauge their progress. However, comparative studies can also be, for a variety of reasons, inappropriate or misleading. One way to assure that what are termed *cross-national comparisons* are credible is to relate them to the long and robust cross-cultural and comparative research tradition. Largely begun by anthropologists in the colonial era, such cross-cultural studies examined and compared human behavior ranging from childrearing practices and initiation rites to the training of craftsmen and sedentary agriculturists. Since the 1950s, work on international and cross-national educational comparisons was undertaken in earnest, as exemplified by a broad array of research under rubrics such as education and development (Fägerlind & Saha, 1983), cross-cultural psychology (Berry, Poortinga, Segall, & Dasen, 1992), and cultural psychology (Stigler, Schweder, & Herdt, 1990).

Interestingly, cross-national comparisons of literacy acquisition and skills are of rather recent vintage, beginning with Downing's (1973) seminal *Comparative Reading* to Scribner and Cole's (1981) well-known research on literacy in Liberia to the more recent IEA study of reading in 32 school systems undertaken under the auspices of the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) (Elley, 1992). Downing's work focused on the cultural specificities of reading in different languages and scripts, Scribner and Cole's on the cognitive consequences of literacy in Africa, and Elley's study evaluated commonalities of performance across a large number of countries from the industrialized and developing worlds.

In the present chapter, some of the complexities involved in the use of literacy assessment tools in a comparative context are described, beginning with the kind of comparative frameworks that may be seen in the works of the authors mentioned earlier. The chapter then considers the implications of these approaches for policy discussions of major comparative literacy issues such as the classification of literacy levels, the use of mother-tongue and second languages in assessment, the comparability of assessment across time and cultures, and the measurement of the social consequences of literacy attainment. The review suggests a number of important limitations, as well as opportunities, in the comparative use of literacy assessments.

## THE "CULTURE PROBLEM": EMIC AND ETIC DISTINCTIONS

Although seeming to refer to the straightforward individual possession of the complementary mental technologies of reading and writing, literacy is not only difficult to define in individuals and delimit within societies, but it is also charged with emotional and political meaning. It was not long ago that newspapers and scholars assigned to whole societies a single referent such as "illiterate and uncivilized"; *illiterate* is still a term that carries a negative connotation around the world.

Defining literacy as an individual cognitive ability was once thought to be simple: It entailed the testing of reading and writing skills. This could involve, as in American voting laws of the 20th century, the ability to sign one's name or even mark an "X." Or, as is done in some present-day societies for statistical and methodological expediency, literacy may be simply inferred from school attendance: those with 4 (or 8 or 12) years of formal public schooling are assumed to be literate. Or, in yet other societies, literacy rates are calculated from the numbers of persons who answer "yes" to the simple question, "Can you read and write?" It is now known that such approaches to presumed literacy may be quite misleading for a host of reasons. Furthermore, when considered as a cultural—as opposed to a cognitive—phenomenon, literacy is even less well defined, because its meanings, functions, and methods of transmission may vary greatly from one cultural group to the next.

As social scientists and policymakers seek to compare and contrast cultural differences in literacy, an important conceptual distinction must be addressed. As first discussed by Pike (1966) and elaborated by Berry and Dasen (1974), the distinction between "emic" and "etic" concepts is a central feature in all comparative studies. *Emic concepts* are those that can be understood only within a single cultural system or society and are measured only according to criteria relevant to and understood within that single system. *Etic concepts* are those that are deduced or derived from a position outside of any particular system and have as a primary goal the analysis of more than a single social system or society—that is, cross-system or cross-societal comparisons.

In this chapter, an etic perspective on literacy assumes that skills such as decoding, word-picture matching, and reading a bus schedule should have substantially the same meaning to different individuals and across different cultural groups. An emic perspective on literacy would encompass skills and meanings associated with literacy within cultural groups such as "script recognition" skills in different orthographies, as well as knowledge about the values, meanings, and uses of print in different cultural contexts. That these practices are thought of by actors and local observers alike as constituting "literate behavior" supports taking

seriously an emic definition of literacy. For the purpose of this chapter, emic literacy skills are those that have not only been "imported" from some other source (such as "keyboarding" skills in developing countries) but also are embedded in some or many real ways into the social life of individuals. What is particularly crucial in the emic-etic distinction is that the emic skills be those that can only be adequately understood within a given cultural framework and not developed out of the historical convenience of those who desire a common system of measurement. Also important is the fact that literacy learners, whether children or adults, are often motivated by precisely those emic aspects of literacy that are connected to their everyday needs and concerns.

The three approaches mentioned earlier—Downing, Scribner and Cole, and Elley—provide useful examples for examining the problem of cultural comparison. Downing (1973) asked specialists in a variety of languages to analyze the nature of reading development within specific languages and orthographies such as Hebrew, Chinese, French, Japanese, and English. Although most contributors to the Downing volume utilized standard frameworks for reading analysis such as word decoding and sentence comprehension, they also focused on what was *specific* to the nature of learning to read in the language and social context of the given society.

In contrast, Scribner and Cole (1981) addressed the "classic" issue of whether there are cognitive consequences to becoming literate, through a combined ethnographic and quasi-experimental study among the Vai people of Liberia. Their methodology focused primarily on the cognitive and literacy skills possessed by nonliterate tribal people by providing within-culture comparisons between schooled and non-schooled adults. Among other things, the researchers were interested in understanding how social practices such as Quranic study and letter writing among commercial traders in Liberia would affect both cognition and literacy. The results, integrating emic and etic approaches to data gathering and analysis, provide one of the most in-depth portraits of literacy and culture available to date.

More recently, the IEA study of reading literacy (Elley, 1992) employed an etic approach to the study of reading in 32 countries, with the general aim of comparing reading achievement levels, as well as looking for relationships between social variables and cognitive outcomes. Considerable efforts were made to assure the adequate translation of test items, as well as the similarity of the 10- and 14-year-old populations surveyed, but, Elley stated, "(i)n the end, . . . each reader must decide for him or herself whether a comparison is adequate for a particular purpose" because "comparisons are useful for many purposes and are certainly better than alternative comparisons made without carefully

controlled empirical data" (p. 8). Although it is difficult to argue against the idea of more (empirical) data, it is less than certain that "more" always means "better." Indeed, in the information-driven societies of today, there are times when the sheer volume of data can overwhelm rational analyses that are based on veridical observations of local reality.

In sum, does an interest in emic skills and behaviors necessarily call into question the utility of etic measures? Not always. Etic measures are clearly important in understanding how people acquire literacy, how educators and policymakers view literacy, and how economic systems interact in an increasingly interdependent world. Throughout the 20th century, literacy has been thought to be associated with formal schooling, student achievement, and economic success; thus, it is not surprising that quantifiable tools would be developed to compare children with other children, adults with other adults, and social and cultural groups with other such groups. Nonetheless, the psychometric measurement of literacy need not and should not be the only way to view the acquisition or possession of literacy skills, though it may well be the most convenient and cost-effective way for policymakers to measure skills across groups of people. However, before considering the problems and prospects of literacy assessment, it is instructive to consider literacy development at a time when modern public schooling was not a part of the comparative frame of reference.

### **LOOKING AT AN EMIC PERSPECTIVE: TRADITIONAL WAYS OF BECOMING LITERATE**

Religious schools—Jewish, Christian, Islamic, and Buddhist—have been among the best known providers of literacy over the past two millennia and remain the loci for much child and adult literacy training today, mainly in developing countries. From the great Islamic universities of Spain and North Africa to the Buddhist monasteries of Thailand and Sri Lanka, scholars and their students gathered traditionally to share the wisdom of the ages through the reading and interpretation of ancient texts and exegeses (Eickelman, 1978). These schools shared a number of common characteristics such as the presence of a "master" and his "apprentices," often with children, adolescents, and adults clustered together in the same class. Teachers were almost always male and had considerable power over their charges, as well as influence in the community at large.

Although most of the traditional masters were functional in the reading and writing of religious texts, what is less well known is that this elite group came to dominate an ever-widening pyramid of students

and a religious public who were much less able to utilize "full" literacy skills. Some masters could engage in religious recitations that required decoding but little comprehension, whereas others might use writing skills acquired in religious school for use in personal letters, business, or political transactions. Such religious literacy is still maintained in diverse geographical areas of the Islamic world, where a style of traditional pedagogy continues to be used in Quranic schools. Even though they lack certain transferable "etic" literacy skills, many Quranic school teachers are considered to be quite literate by the community, because they have the accoutrements of literacy (such as owning books, presiding over books, etc.) and because they are simply the most literate individuals in their community (Wagner, 1993).

The findings from such ethnographic work in North Africa are not irrelevant. What is at stake in the consideration of emic literacy skills is the question of what constitutes the right kind of literacy in a particular context or society. As the definitions of literacy are broadened, they will be ever more emic definitions of literacy. Thus, in the recent National Adult Literacy Survey (NALS) (Kirsch, Jungeblut, Jenkins, & Kolstad, 1993), literacy is defined as: "Using printed and written information to function in society to achieve one's goals, and to develop one's knowledge and potential" (p. 2). When extrapolated to its full extent, such a definition could become quite varied from society to society and interpreted in many different ways. The goals that people have from education are many, as is the variability of one's perceived "potential." If used as a definition in international comparisons, how can one cope with cultural variation?

## THE SOCIO-CULTURAL DEBATE IN LITERACY ASSESSMENT

In order to provide worldwide statistical comparisons, UNESCO, the lead international agency concerned with literacy, has relied almost entirely on data provided by its member countries (UNESCO, 1983). These countries in turn typically rely on national censuses, which most often determine literacy ability by self-assessment questionnaires and/or by means of a proxy variable utilizing the number of years of primary schooling. Many specialists now agree that such indirect measures of literacy may be unreliable, though there is renewed discussion of the utility of proxy measures (Murray, this volume). Nonetheless, little change in international literacy measurement has been forthcoming, with the exception of recent national surveys in the United States and Canada. Most specialists agree that direct forms of measurement are more complex and costly than indirect estimation methods, and thus



many countries have not yet chosen to invest in national survey strategies. In addition, any change in the methodology used for calculating literacy rates in a population might result in uncomfortable political consequences; this happened recently in the United States when the "official" U.S. literacy rate of over 95%, revised as a consequence of redefinition and survey assessment (via the NALS, see Kirsch & Jungeblut, this volume), was reduced to somewhat over 50% of the adult population. Further, in addition to technical and financial considerations, there has been a continuing debate in a number of other areas to be described later, which would have a significant impact on establishing valid, reliable, and credible comparisons of national literacy rates.

### **Classification Issues**

In the 1960s and 1970s, when many Third World countries entered the United Nations, the majority of the adult populations of these countries typically had never gone to school nor learned to read and write. It was relatively easy in those contexts to simply define all such individuals as "illiterate." The situation now is more complex, as some contact with primary schooling, nonformal education programs, and the mass media is made by most families across the globe. Thus, even though parents in many countries may be virtually illiterate, it is not unusual for one or more of their children to be able to read and write to some degree. For this reason, it would seem that simple dichotomous classifications—still in use by many international organizations and national governments—should be avoided because they tend to misrepresent the range or continuum of literacy abilities that are common to most contemporary societies.

Of course, with the advent of the NALS survey in the United States, some specialists are now more aware of survey methods for measuring literacy levels in a population. In this large-scale survey methodology, interval scales similar to those used in standardized test items are utilized to collect data on observed literacy skills. These data are then used to form performance scales ranging from zero to 500 or 1,000 unit points, and adults are assigned, on the basis of their test scores, to one of five levels of performance, ranging from low through intermediate levels to high performance. With a focus on developing countries, Wagner and Srivastava (1989) produced a low-cost method for the development of household surveys of literacy. Based on the results of these and related studies, it appears likely that further international comparisons will be undertaken utilizing household survey methods. Key concerns are how the skills are assessed and how the levels along the achievement scales will fit with local cultural variations around the world—a topic closely linked with language issues.

### Language Policy, Multilingualism, and Multiple Literacies

Most countries have formulated an explicit language policy that usually states which language or languages have official status. Often the decision on national or official language(s) is based on such factors as major linguistic groups, colonial or postcolonial history, and the importance of a given language to the interests of economic development. Official languages are also those commonly used in primary school, although there may be differences between languages used in beginning schooling and those used later on. The use of mother tongue instruction in both primary and adult education remains a topic of continuing debate (Engle, 1975).

Although there is usually general agreement that all official language(s) should be assessed in a national literacy survey (e.g., English in the United States, English and French in Canada, and German, French, Italian and Romanch in Switzerland), there may be disagreement over the assessment of literacy in nonofficial or semi-official languages when these have a recognized and functional orthography (e.g., Athabaskan in Canada, Hungarian in Romania, or Spanish in the United States). In many countries, there exist a multitude of local languages that have varying status with respect to the official language. How these languages and literacies may be included in a national literacy survey can be a matter of serious debate. For example, in certain predominantly Muslim countries in sub-Saharan Africa (e.g., Senegal or Ghana), the official language of literacy might be French or English, whereas Arabic—which is taught in Islamic schools and used by a sizable population for certain everyday and religious tasks—is usually excluded from official literacy censuses. Similarly, literacy in Chinese, Spanish, Cherokee, and other written languages have generally been ignored in literacy assessments in the United States.

An emic perspective would suggest that all languages, literacy abilities, and scripts are human and national resources and that to ignore such abilities is to underestimate these resources and what they can offer. Assuming available support for undertaking a broad and representative survey, effort should be made to investigate and assess literacy in all “significant” linguistic populations, in which “significant” might be defined by population size (see Wagner, 1992). Such a perspective is even more essential in studies that term themselves *comparative*, as the diversity of the languages and literacies in a country is the true measure of social variation—that is why, after all, literacy is a target of comparison among countries. It is not uncommon, however, for governments to make arbitrary language and literacy “exclusions” from nationally representative samples for reasons of efficacy, politics, ethnic strife, and so forth.

### **Comparability of Data: Balancing National and International Needs**

The comparability of data—across time and countries—is a major concern for researchers, policymakers, and planning agencies. If definitions and classifications vary, then it can be difficult, if not impossible, to compare data collected through different surveys. Alternatively, if comparability is the primary goal, while less attention is paid to the validity of the definitions and classifications of literacy and the consistency of the larger population, then the data may become meaningless or distorted, as in the discussion on emic analyses earlier. International and national needs, definitions, and research strategies may or may not come into conflict over the issue of comparability, depending on the particular problem addressed. For example, as mentioned earlier, UNESCO still solicits literacy data worldwide, in which literacy is measured in terms of the number of “literate” and “illiterate.” For most countries, this dichotomous type of classification presents few practical problems and is cheap, while providing international agencies with a cross-national and time-series framework for analyzing literacy by geographic or economic world regions. However, the fact that literacy may be regarded as a “moving target” limits the usefulness of time-series data about literacy.

On the other hand, national educational planners may want to know much more about the effects of the completion of certain grades of primary or secondary school—or of a particular literacy campaign—on levels of literacy attainment. In these cases a simple dichotomy would be grossly insufficient. Furthermore, national planners will want to have precise data as to which languages and which literacies are used in each region and by ethnic group, in addition to age and gender differences. The collection of such data has largely been ignored by international agencies to date, although the recent North American survey initiatives in Canada and the United States offer substantial information on major cross-classification variables, even though not comprehensively (language diversity was still not adequately sampled). Compared to census-based literacy estimates, household-level surveys such as the NALS offer more opportunity to create a detailed picture of literacy skill profiles and their demographic correlates in national populations.

### **Measuring the Consequences of Literacy**

Will a change from a lower to a higher level of literacy skill make a concrete difference in an individual's life? Looking at the “average literacy rate” and comparing this statistic with health indicators (such as infant mortality rates or fertility rates), or estimating “employability” from

such a rate, cannot adequately illuminate the diversity of individual human conditions. The author's own work in rural and low-literate African countries has demonstrated that those with higher literacy tend to be better off economically, but also that youth, adults, and educational policymakers increasingly believe that more education and more literacy will not necessarily lead to greater wealth, because more and more school graduates have not found suitable employment (Wagner, 1993).

Since the 1950s, perhaps the most compelling argument for human resources development is that literacy and schooling will lead to economic growth in countries that make a sufficient and appropriate investment in them. This is the approach sometimes referred to as investment in human capital (Psacharopoulos & Woodhall, 1985). Bowman and Anderson (1973), for example, went so far as to claim that an 80% national adult literacy rate would be necessary for rapid economic development, whereas a 40% literacy rate would be required for a minimum take-off of economic development. This type of claim makes use of aggregated data across many countries of the world, based on a significant correlation between GNP and literacy rates. The notion of causality imposed on such correlations is very hazardous, of course, but it is still quite common in the discourse of economic and literacy planners.

The issue, however, is not so much whether, but rather how to promote literacy in a way that is consistent with overall policy objectives. Even if conclusive evidence of the marginal economic benefits of increased literacy were available, the question for development planners and literacy and education specialists should be: How can one most efficiently achieve increased literacy levels within the available economic and social resources? Here, the emphasis is on efficiency and appropriateness, domains in which specialists can play a crucial role. What is efficient and appropriate, of course, brings forth a whole series of qualifiers such as: for whom, in which language, for what purpose, using what methods, and so on. Only through a better understanding of the types, levels, and sociocultural contexts of literacy in a given society—questions bearing on an emic interpretation of literacy—can adequate policy initiatives be formulated. In this area exist some of the best opportunities for literacy work in the coming years.

## POLICY IMPLICATIONS OF EMIC DIMENSIONS OF LITERACY

There is a recognized need among planners and education specialists to treat educational achievement (including literacy and basic skills) as something to be understood as an outcome of "multiple" factors in a society. Thus, in IEA-like cross-national comparisons (such as the recent

reading literacy study, Elley, 1992), the term "horse race" is often used by critics who claim that the nations-as-datapoints approach covers up far too many empirical "sins." As mentioned previously, the emic perspective posits that literacy is as much a part of culture as is, say, language, and just as difficult to disaggregate and measure.

The implications of this proposition are potentially quite serious for at least two reasons. First, if literacy is so deeply tied to the integral definition of separate cultures, and if a broad definition such as that proposed by the NALS is used, then how can common understandings of literacy levels or competencies be reached across cultures? That is, literacy in poor communities may be viewed in quite different ways than is the case in wealthy communities, or in other societies altogether; indeed the definition of poor may well have a radically different operational definition in different societies, and often does. Further, when one attempts to compare individuals or groups on whether they are self-defined as "literate," it can emerge that different definitions preclude valid comparison. This is often the case with census-derived information in which large differences in schooling bias the decision matrix for responding to the question, "Can you read and write?"

Second, if literacy is so much a part of culture, then "changing" or "improving" with literacy that is etic in nature (i.e., derived from the model of school-based literacy)—for example, through campaigns, worker training, or even schooling—is to alter, sometimes forcibly, the way people live. Because policymakers and educators have often treated school-based literacy as essentially separate from culture (what Street, 1987, refers to as an "autonomous" model of literacy), relatively little attention has been paid to the negative consequences of becoming literate. The very idea of negative effects would seem antithetical to many, and yet there is ample evidence that the failure of many literacy programs and campaigns often results from culturally and socially based resistance to outsiders' intrusion into the lives of people who have lived with little or emically based literacy over long periods of time (Arnové & Graff, 1987; Wagner, 1992); this same type of resistance has been proposed by Giroux (1983) as being partly responsible for the "refusal" of minority children to engage and learn in American classrooms. The policy implication here is that what people are supposedly "missing" (as defined by outsiders) may not be what they want; this is, then, an issue more of consumer demand, rather than of supply.

Taking this argument one step further, policymakers may need to reconsider the high priority given to the achievement of universal or *minimum/basic* literacy among adults in low-literate societies or in low-literate "pockets" of industrialized societies (sometimes referred to as Fourth World communities). An alternative policy would suggest that

resources be invested in a more constrained fashion (directing more funds to preschool and primary schools, or to specific groups of adults), so that some individuals—those less resistant to and more motivated for change—would have access to the possibility to become literate or more literate. Indeed, recent evidence on volunteer literacy efforts in the United States suggests that the least literate portion of the population is remarkably resistant to literacy training, often exhibiting much higher rates of program attrition and lower learning levels with only one or two months of program completion (Venezky, 1992).

Yet, how do we come to grips with the common sense notion that literacy should be provided to all, in the same way that governments try to provide health services? If the present analysis has validity, literacy programs that are broadly and etically conceived are not only likely to have less success but are also likely to be least successful among those people who perform least well in etic forms of literacy and who are further from the mainstream dominant culture in the country. Furthermore, such literacy programs may be counter-productive in the long term, simply because they pose a challenge to the cultural lives of the people "targeted" by literacy programs.

Again, the notion of emic-centered literacy may run counter to the prevailing sense of the singular, ever-shrinking nature of the global economy and the importance of universal primary schooling. Is this a narrow scholarly harping on the sidelines, or are these key issues that speak to the most disadvantaged in each society?

## CONCLUSIONS

In the popular media and in academic circles it is not uncommon to hear that low levels of literacy and basic skills are among the chief problems facing contemporary societies today, especially in times of significant economic restructuring. And, there are numerous arguments which would support concern for such a point of view, ranging from the economic pressure on the workplace, to the changing nature of workplace organization, to increased farmer productivity in developing countries, to the major problems endemic in urban secondary schools in France, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Literacy and basic skills development are part of policy discussions in all of these areas. Yet it has remained unclear what type of comparative assessments would help to address most effectively the perceived problems and at which levels of analysis.

For it is clear that national and international needs may not be one and the same. Countries are diverse places, each with a multiplicity of groups that vary along ethnic, linguistic, social class, fiscal, and other

dimensions. Each country has its own special history of sociopolitical development and its own experiences with formal schooling and broader educational development. The international community has its interests as well, mostly in trying to guide national decision making from indices of where nations "fall" on some scale of economic productivity or worker efficiency. Thus, the opportunities of adult literacy assessment in comparative context may affect national and international interests in contrasting ways. National interests and "internal" considerations (involving, for example population diversity) may be seen as nettlesome problems or simply constraints by planners concerned with comparison. On the other hand, national considerations about population diversity, linguistic variations, and even orthographic diversity (such as unusual features of a script) may be seen as having to be sacrificed on the altar in order to achieve a larger basis for etic comparison.

Seen as problems, these contrasts between national and international values pose many difficulties for the comparativists. Nonetheless, embedded in them lie considerable opportunities as well. Comparative studies can highlight the unusual precisely because the "square peg cannot fit in the round hole." The level of investment in empirical data gathering in IEA-like studies is, for many developing countries, far greater than that made heretofore. Thus, there are opportunities to create a research infrastructure through the carrying out of international comparisons, not so different in kind from that achieved by anthropologists working with diverse groups in developing countries. Perhaps most importantly, comparative studies can, if properly designed, help to achieve a greater understanding of cultural values and attitudes toward learning and literacy. Such an approach would enable the problem of diversity to be turned into an opportunity to study consumer demand.

What then can be taken from "horse race" comparisons, in which one country edges out another by a few questions on a test? The argument of this chapter suggests that those comparisons are of less immediate interest than what can be learned from cultural variation on values and attitudes, as well as from within culture variations within a given society. Unfortunately, sponsors (i.e., funding agencies) of comparative studies usually need the competitive (horse race) aspects to "sell" the international study to policymakers. Hopefully, a better understanding of the opportunities embedded within cross-national comparisons can lead to a useful change in this funding discourse.

Literacy—even across its cultural and linguistic diversity—is an inherent part of the cultural fabric by which people everywhere live their lives. Literacy problems as they exist are located in individuals with varying degrees and types of literacy skills but also in each society's normative behaviors and beliefs. To undertake both national and

international assessments will require an unusual degree of sensitivity to sociocultural variation. But if this variation can be captured and understood—and not just circumvented—the field of adult literacy and basic skills development will be that much more enhanced.

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# ***Adult Basic Skills Innovations in Measurement and Policy Analysis***

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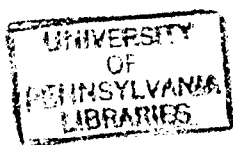
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